

Macalester Journal of Philosophy

Volume 20 | Issue 1

Article 4

6-21-2012

The Irony of Ironism: A Critique of Rorty's Postmetaphysical Utopia

Jeffrey Rivera
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo>

Recommended Citation

Rivera, Jeffrey (2011) "The Irony of Ironism: A Critique of Rorty's Postmetaphysical Utopia," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol20/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester Journal of Philosophy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

THE IRONY OF IRONISM: A CRITIQUE OF RORTY'S POSTMETAPHYSICAL UTOPIA

Jeffrey Rivera

Abstract In Richard Rorty's work *Contingency Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty attempts to elucidate a mechanism for dealing with the public dissent likely to arise from a group of individuals he terms "ironists". This mechanism, a strong public/private distinction, he hopes will allow for a self proliferating, ever progressing liberal utopia. This paper will reject this distinction as internally incoherent under its own terms, and will assert that even if Rorty's distinction is successful, it ultimately attempts to proliferate the type of individual we would like to avoid.

In his book, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty urges us to rethink our conception of what a liberal society should look like, and which values it should hold and promote. Rorty claims that our current vision of a liberal society is one that is governed by the idea that cruelty, the promotion of suffering, is the worst thing that we as liberals do. In addition to this, Rorty appeals to the idea that a special kind of suffering, humiliation, for a liberal, is an especially bad form of cruelty. Rorty is aware however, that the type of individual likely to cause civil unrest and humiliation, the unorthodox thinker, is also a potential catalyst for political, cultural, scientific and philosophical progress. He is at once the liberal hero, an enigmatic poet who makes the world his own, but he must also be the villain: the egoist par excellence.

Recognizing the danger and importance of such individuals, Rorty creates a description of liberalism which might give us the best of both worlds; private self creation, as well as public unity and social cohesion. In this paper, I will argue that the mechanism that Rorty asserts to bridge this gap, the affirmation of a strong public/private distinction, will not feasibly do the work which he requires. Furthermore, I seek to show that even if this distinction holds up, the ironic liberal should not be the type of individual we would like to promote in a utopian society.

What is an ironist, and why should a liberal society protect the autonomy of these individuals? In order to answer this question, Rorty appeals to historical change as being a product of the evolution of language. Rorty describes the ironist as being indebted to a specific historical view, one that will see the strong poet, the thinker who re-describes and creates something new, as instrumental to intellectual progress.

The ironist understands that he is born into a specific historical juncture. This notion can be equated more or less to the existential notion of facticity found in thinkers such as Heidegger and Kierkegaard. This is the idea that, with the inception of one's life, comes a set of specific conditions which relate to and characterize that being. For Rorty, the most relevant aspects of one's facticity seem to be the subject's relation to history, and specifically historical discourse, and the language games he is prone to play given his position within this canon. This is a specific contingency which all beings must depart from in order to become self-creators.

The key difference between the ironist and the liberal is brought to light with regards to this realization. Whereas the liberal

is content to play the current language games and realize his self-creation through these paradigms, the ironist views his being born into a specific paradigm as constraining. He feels that if he is to be the strong poet, one who fears his self-creation is merely a replica of a past self, he must create a very strong sense of his own identity. This cannot be done within the current paradigm because it places importance on specific modes of thinking. Rorty shows us this in his analysis of the character of specific time periods. For instance, if we look at thinkers whom we perceive as being particularly influential, we see that they do not merely find or relay information in light of the current views on an issue, they seek to re-describe the phenomenon under a new sort of view. For instance, Einstein's theory of relativity does not simply work out some inadequacies of Newton's theory, it fundamentally re-describes all relevant phenomena in a completely different light. It somehow makes us see things in a different way and therefore makes things new. This is the sort of re-description that the ironist sees as important to his self creation.

We might use this sort of example to point out another important feature of Rorty's theory, namely that there are specific historical conditions of possibility for the adoption of new language games. The first of these is that new descriptions of the world are brought about in light of past inconsistencies or uselessness of older language games. This might be understood in a similar fashion as scientific theory choice. As discourse progresses within a subject (slowly, as a product of small contingencies), problematics arise within it. For instance, Newton's theory cannot properly describe phenomena when approaching the speed of light. These inconsistencies are typically dealt with by the

introduction of ad hoc solutions. Novel re-descriptions remove these inconsistencies by creating a new view of the interactions of the phenomena at hand.

It is important to note here that novel descriptions initially have no place within a the extant language game, because they are not truth candidates within that language game. As they are posited, re-descriptions are metaphorical, but have the potential to become truth candidates as they are adopted by language users – as those language users begin to interpret the world in that particular fashion. For Rorty, it is crucial to realize that this process of language adoption is not one of the language user's rational choice, but a *process*. Since the individual statements of novel language games are not truth candidates, the old and new languages are adopted not in light of a comparison between the novel and the previous descriptions of phenomenon, but by the slow shifting of the way particular agents see themselves and describe their world. Rorty recognizes that for most (for the non-ironists), the creation of an idiosyncratic language is non-essential to their notion of self-creation and as such, they are not want to change their manner of speaking. To put it another way, non-ironists don't necessarily see themselves as, but inherently are, people who value a form of historical continuity.

This valuing of continuity is also implicit in the liberal's relationship to what he calls his "final vocabulary". A user's final vocabulary is constituted by those terms which he uses to relate himself, his desires, his goals, and values, to others. A user's final vocabulary is "final in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative

recourse.”¹ Again, the liberal has no problem using typical language games to elucidate his ultimate conception of self. He sees the evolution of his final vocabulary as linear. The ironist that Rorty describes, on the other hand, sees particular vocabularies as constraining to his notion of self creation, as the ironist is someone who cannot simply take the paradigm which was factually imposed upon him and proceed from there in self creation. He must appropriate and re-describe the past in order to make it his own and become a completely idiosyncratic self creation. The liberal is content to move forward, while the ironist wishes to create an entire new line. He must idiomatically create the taste by which he will be judged. If the ironist creates his own vocabulary, he has thereby created his own novel system for truth candidacy and therefore can see himself as authentically created.

We might remark that this description of the ironist sounds very much like the picture of the “authentic being” described by Heidegger or Sartre, or Nietzsche’s “*ubermensch*”. Presumably, many of us would find the promotion of *this* type of self creator as questionable, as they have been traditionally linked to anti-liberal, (and sometime fascist) ideology. However, Rorty offers a different take as to why we should wish to steer clear of the ironist type.

Rorty describes liberals as those who think that the promotion of suffering as the worst thing liberals due. Further, Rorty describes a special sort of suffering that should be avoided within liberal societies: humiliation. Ostensibly, it is a special type of suffering for liberals because we, as liberals, are concerned with

¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 73.

self-creation. Following his linguistic self-narrative view, Rorty's formulation of humiliation is done in terms of linguistic communication. Humiliation is a special sort of suffering in the sense that it is a forced shift in one's final vocabulary and therefore one's self creation becomes compromised. Because the ironist is ever anxious about the terms in which he describes himself as a result of his rejection of objective language choice, and therefore truth, Rorty asserts that the ironist is the sort of human being *by nature* who has no respect for the humiliation of others' vocabularies. He is therefore the villain of the liberal society, while at the same time being the catalyst for change and progress.

What does it mean to humiliate someone linguistically, and what are the conditions of possibility for this form of cruelty? As we have discussed, Rorty believes that shifts in language are products of many small re-descriptions which lead to a shift in one's final vocabulary. These shifts in vocabularies slowly lead to paradigmatic language changes. Slow language changes are normal and covetable, as they are based on the decisions of the agent (or groups of agents) and help to inform his self narrative. What occurs when we liberals are humiliated, Rorty asserts, is that our final vocabulary has been forced to shift, resulting in a major challenge to one's identity. It is important to note that the ironist is immune from this sort of humiliation because they are aware that "the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change" and they are "always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves."²

² Ibid., 74.

Fortunately, Rorty seeks not to promote the ironist, but the *liberal* ironist. The liberal ironist, is an individual who holds fast to his ironic values privately, but shows no sign of ironic ideology publically. Rorty asserts that the liberal ironist can maintain this view because he understands that his, and everyone's, language is ultimately nothing more than a view informed by contingencies which an ironist must continually overcome. To put this point in another fashion, the ironist understands that truth is merely a property of a specific language game. He sees that the language games we choose to play are based upon contingencies about the way the world is, and thus how we see the world. He also recognizes that these games shift over time; they are savored or spit out by different cultures, political factions and intellectual movements. In short they see language and therefore truth evolving, and therefore reject the ability to make objective decisions about the value of playing any one language game over another. Rorty feels that this relativistic position allows a strong enough reason for the ironist to affirm a public liberal standpoint, while also embracing a commitment to hiding his ironism in the shadows of his or her private life.

It is this mechanism that will allow for his ever-evolving flourishing post-metaphysical utopia. Rorty claims that through the linguistic evolution the ironist offers, paired with a sense of solidarity afforded by his liberal values, we can create a stable liberal society full of ironists. Since each of these ironists seeks to break with the status quo, Rorty claims we will have more and more re-descriptions, and therefore more fuel for future ironists' self creation.

I would like to offer three criticisms here. First, such a liberal society has a low potential to be endorsed by the ironist, even if he firmly holds that the public/private distinction should be enforced. Secondly, the distinction causes the ironist to be an almost pitiable character and therefore we should not promote a society where “irony is universal.” Lastly, the ironist by becoming a liberal destructs too much of what it means to be an ironist, to make the label “ironic liberal” plausible.

First, it seems to me that to force the ironist into affirming a particular political conception is antithetical to the idea of the ironist. Just because the ironist is ostensibly immune to humiliation by means of language (as his final vocabulary is ever in flux), does not mean that his language and desires are not limited by the holding particular political ideologies. In holding particular political doctrines, we are acting antithetical to the idea that the ironist is a human being who is ever in flux about his self description. By positing a reason to hold liberalist ideals, he is further constraining himself. He is more likely to be a mere replica, and therefore he might get the sense that his public affirmation of liberalism constrains his self narrative. Indeed the ironist does not merely mentally gratify his own idiosyncratic language, but seeks to use it to describe himself and his desires. If he finds his desires are contrary to the desires of liberalism, then he is at a loss to express his desires.

In examining the justification of his liberal ideals, it seems to me that these ideals do not stem from the ironist’s ironic values. If the justification for the agent’s irony comes from the realization of the contingency of his final vocabulary, then it seems to me that this view cannot inform a liberal viewpoint. Since the ironist thinks

it is fatuous to regard his or her final vocabulary as being stable, why should the ironist respect the contingent values of others? It almost seems like the liberal ironist takes more seriously the ideals and values of others, while rejecting and suppressing his own. If this is the case, he has no reason to be a liberal, since his self-creation is merely a secondary concern.

Furthermore, it seems like the ironist is precisely the type of person who would reject the type of justification which Rorty believes might inform the ironist's decision. The justification given for an ironic affirmation of liberal ideals is necessarily an inter-subjective one. If I, as an ironist, understand that each individual's views are unimportant, then I may see others as like myself and may seek to promote the welfare of others self creation. This to me seems to be antithetical to the sort of view which the ironist wishes to pursue in the sense that it seems close to positing an objective truth about the intrinsic nature of the self. It is the truth that each person's self narrative is important to his or her self, but recognizes that it is the product of a plethora of contingencies. As such we get a tacit appeal to inter-subjective truth when we posit the ironist's defense of liberalism. This sort of truth positing cannot be affirmed by the ironist.

Another seeming inconsistency within the ironist position is that he sees himself as somehow historically privileged. Although his view of history has led him to the Nietzschean conclusion that any truth about man is necessarily a truth about man for a small period of time (perhaps within a given language), he still has based this view on a particular conception of history. He sees himself as having found some sort of objective truth about the ebb and flow of historical paradigms. Not only has he

discovered the truth of this assertion, but he lives his life in subservience to this fact. His ever changing self narrative, his attitudes toward others, are dominated by this realization. This seems like the ironist ironically takes his beliefs a bit too seriously, and therefore must reject a major tenet of his ironism.

If the ironist is such that he sees his final vocabulary as utterly contingent, what does it matter if he or she has put their stamp upon history? It is just something that will be seen as fodder for re-description by a future agent. Since the ironist sees his facticity governing himself as a bad thing, as something in the way of self narrative, why would he want to join in creating a potentially entangling factual paradigm for future agents to live within? Of course, this fact is unavoidable. If the changing of language is a result of many small contingencies, then of course every agent who uses a language could possibly (and unbeknownst to that agent) contribute to a change in the predominant paradigmatic language. Therefore, the intention of the ironist must be misplaced. If there is no way of knowing what particular states of affairs our thoughts might manifest as a result of discourse, it should not be desirable that one language be put in place of another.

This criticism lends itself to the idea of the private containment of ironism. Since language for Rorty is a causal mechanism, it seems unlikely that private irony can be contained. We have no certainty over which statements might or might not influence other agents' self descriptions. Therefore the affirmation of a distinction between public and private asserted is obtuse. For instance, as a philosopher, I continually read other philosophers, and in doing such an action, simply reading a book, my final

vocabulary is under the threat of being affected. Any proposition, unbeknownst to me, might be some sort of secret key for deconstructing my entire vocabulary.

This point is echoed in Charles Taylor's "Ethics of Authenticity". In his own attempt to bring authenticity into the liberal sphere, Taylor rejects the premise that authenticity is a purely self-created notion. Our familial, social and political relationships are instrumental in our personal pursuit of authenticity. Taylor recognizes that the culture of authenticity within liberal societies is one where the value of self-choice is paramount. However, the reality of the situation is that when we make choices, we don't simply value the choice, we value specifically what we choose to defend and its relationship to our daily lives. "On the intimate level, we can see how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others."³ Basically, the self creating individual cannot atomistically enjoy self creation. He cannot keep it private. He must use the external world to validate his language. The liberal ironist of course, in his anxiety over the potential contamination of the public via his ideals, does not have this option open to him. We see that atomism necessarily undermines ironism, as that ironism has no means of expressing itself and therefore the ironist has no way of seeing his language as useful.

To say that we must in fact revere the public/private distinction in order to protect ironists seems obtuse. Past political and intellectual cultures have been far more repressive with regards to autonomy. This did not stop any of the past ironists from

³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1992) 49.

having their work influence future historical paradigms. If the ironist has such a strong grasp upon history, how does he need protection? This seems to me to raise the suspicion that Rorty is not actually concerned with a wariness of the public's self description being undermined by the ironist, but a protection of the ironist from external forces. For if the ironist is such that he is disposed to regard his self created vocabulary as ever in flux, what reason should the ironist have to be wary of political institutions possibly dominating his ends?

Let us look further at my claim that the ironist cannot possibly stop himself from the threat of contaminating public liberalism. The sources which cause a language user to adopt certain ways of looking at problems, creating his own meaning, cannot be intrinsic to the self. Self creation is entirely a process which is co-formed with and projected upon external forces. If one wants to reject that any force outside of the self should be used as a tool for self creation, then one rejects any possibility of self-creation. If we are unaware of how languages shape or might shape our future language, then how can the ironist save his own final vocabulary? Isn't his final vocabulary continually barraged by external language games? On top of this, the ironist is already skittish about his ever changing final vocabularies and self perceptions. Given this picture of an ironist, it seems unlikely that he might avert the possibility of (even unintentional) humiliation at the hands of other language users. What is left for Rorty's liberal ironist but an ever anxious, hermetic existence?

However, this is not the kind of life we live. Political and social concerns are implicit in the idea of self creation. We do not live in some kind of personal vacuum of our own intuitions. Our

relationship to others and the world (perhaps also history), is important to our definition of self and without these we cannot be the ever changing self determiners that Rorty wishes us to be. Without conditions of significance, reasons to care about something or other, we simply have no criterion with which to make choices valuable to us. If we are to accept Rorty's paradigm of self choice, for your life's story to remain untainted, we would of course (if possible) have infinite control over our final vocabularies, we would reduce the possibility of humiliation. But what kind of life would the ironist enjoy? His self narrative would consist of pure self created fantasy. It would be trivial without an external public to project his ideals upon. Ironically, by having infinite power for self assertion and value creation, the ironist would have removed his possibility of having such a power.

The idea that an ironist can live in this way, is of course ridiculous. It seems that what Rorty is concerned with is not in fact, the firm distinction between public and private spheres, but of the protection of the individual's self narrative against societal commandeering. The purpose of positing the public/private distinction in the first place, was an attempt at the reduction of humiliation and cruelty: the worst thing liberals do. But it was posited in order to protect the general public against the ironist. However, what it looks like is that the ironist himself is the one which is being protected by the distinction. Since self creation and therefore irony, cannot possibly be privatized, anyone and everyone is subject to the humiliation of the ironist, (including other ironists). In short, there is no guarantee that private irony will not "contaminate" the public notion of liberalism: the aversion to suffering. In affirming the public private distinction Rorty is not

saving the public from the ironist, but the ironist from public interference.

The ironist is also put in a peculiar psychological disposition with regard to his work. As we've noted, the ironist is such that he regards the relative unimportance of his self creation as the basis for his public liberalism. It is hard to see how the ironist can see his views as being important to the progression of history, but yet as unimportant to others. In fact, doesn't the ironist wish to influence other, futurally contingent ironists? Because of his break with his facticity, he is concerned with the progression of history: of specific futural agents' potential synthesis with his vocabulary.

These remarks show that the ironist is in fact concerned with something external: with his position and relationship to the evolution of language and therefore historical paradigms. He regards his existence as contingent upon his history, and also as his self-creation as relational to this history.

We might ask ourselves now, if an ironist is unconcerned with external forces when it comes to self creation, aren't we affirming a metaphysical transcendent? It seems like in affirming the individualization of the self, atomization, we are falling into a pitfall where self-hood is no longer questionable. The ironist is a deconstructionist on many fronts, he is able to laugh at his own final vocabulary and assert its meaningfulness, but at the same time he is on a particular side of the metaphysical pole, a side which his heroes like Nietzsche and Heidegger are antithetical: the subject-object distinction. In a post-metaphysical society, it is unclear how Rorty can possibly start with a metaphysical claim: the self exists. As this claim is part of a justification of the

public/private distinction, and because as an anti-metaphysician the ironist can reject this premise, it is hard to see why all ironists might adhere to it.

Another worry about the ironist position is that in adhering to a strict privatization of ironists, is one raised by Daniel Conway. If we are to privatize the ironists' pursuits, we necessarily force him into an anti-social hermetic existence. The liberal ironist is one whose liberalism comes before his ironism. As such, the ironist feels responsible not to influence the final vocabulary of others. But if the ironist is afraid of this notion, and he is unsure whether his language may or may not change the self describing actions of others, he might not have any reasons to perform acts of overt kindness. As Conway puts it, the "liberal ironists thus double conserve themselves, sequestering themselves in the private sphere and ingesting moral edification that may prevent future expenditures of cruelty."⁴

Rorty perhaps attempts to give us a way out of this. The liberal ironist, in his commitment to avert suffering, can attempt to understand the ways those who speak with different vocabularies might be humiliated. To do this he suggests the ironic liberal to study authors such as Nabokov and Orwell, authors who describe humiliation.

Again, we might look at this sort of provision and evaluate whether the ironist is the sort of being we wish to encourage. In addition to his private self creation, the ironist is also compelled to study artistic works. He is committed to not only knowledge of

⁴ Daniel Conway "Taking Irony Seriously: Rorty's Postmetaphysical Liberalism," *American Literary History* 3, no. 1 (1991): 200.

historical paradigms, but of an understanding of different types of cruelty. What sort of moral imperative is Rorty giving to the ironist? This seems to me to be a direct violation of the ironist's metaphysical aversion. Even privately the ironist is seen to be dominated by his political affiliation with liberalism. The ironist is committed to a form of hyper liberal asceticism.

In his work, Rorty has attempted to give valid grounds for the promotion of ironists within our society. However, it seems that this characterization is good for neither liberals nor ironists. Though Rorty seeks to (furtively) increase the autonomy of the ironist, he implicates him in a life without a possibility for authentic self creation. The onus is placed upon the ironist himself to avert anti-liberal claims, whereas the liberal comes off scot free. As such, we would do good not to create a liberal society where a strong Rortian public/private distinction is honored.

Bibliography

- Conway, Daniel. "Taking Irony Seriously: Rorty's Postmetaphysical Liberalism." *American Literary History* 3, no.1 (1991): 198-208. Print.
- Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.